

STEINAR HAGA KRISTENSEN

La Période Brune (Origines moqueuses et Sceptique du doute)

An essay by Eirik Senje



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Most closely associated with idea of the “période” in an art historical context is without doubt Spanish painter Pablo Picasso’s *Période Bleu* (*Blue Period*), 1901-04. Said to have come about as a result of personal struggle and loss, the period took the shape of a series of sombre motifs painted in blue tones, often tending towards social realism in their choice of subject. While not very popular at the time, the work would later become amongst the artist’s most celebrated. Other examples include Belgian painter Rene Magritte’s *Période Vache* (*Cow Period*), 1947-48. A more conscious artistic turn carried out in order to make a statement, the stylistic, colourfully fauvist-like work did not do well at the time, though it succeeded in its goal of causing an annoyance amongst Parisian surrealists whose self-important arrogance the painter had developed a distaste for (later, Magritte would claim that his wife didn’t like his new style and cite this as the reason for his subsequent abandonment of the venture). Steinar Haga Kristensen’s *Période Brune* (*Brown Period*) is a period brought about by a very brown time, and is therefore called his brown period.

Recalling my first encounter with Haga Kristensen’s work several years ago: I was then struck by the immediacy of its visceral repulsiveness, sparking a powerful need to distance myself from its many unsettling implications by sarcastically remarking that “Whatever it is, it’s certainly ugly enough”. Later, as I would reach greater familiarity with Haga Kristensen’s impressive body of work, it would become apparent to me that what I had then been exposed to was early tendencies of his *Période Brune* (the earliest known examples are found 2008 in the exhibition *Brunt og Vanskelig* (*Brown and Difficult*), although there have been suggestions made that there may exist even earlier brown period work). In the years following these early brown works, Haga Kristensen’s rich, though somewhat more polemical work revolving amongst other things around the repetition of subjectively primeval motifs within different media, would take precedence over the *Période Brune* until its recent resurgence. This raises some questions.

While the idea of the “période” within artistic practice is closely associated with a singular subject making a turn in their practice, an interesting link can be drawn towards the idea of the broader “artistic movement”: For instance, the early avant-gardes which grappled with modernity and the death of god, the mid-century Situationist movement, with its politically radical colonization of previously unpoliticized territory; or more recently the Crapstractionist struggle to spiritualize neo-liberalist ideals such as overindulgence, money-grabbing, self-empowerment and

selective ignorance by juxtaposing a mimesis of early avant-garde pictorial deconstruction with commercially viable mass production strategies devoid of original thought. Movements such as these will often stem from a collective of individuals exchanging and affirming ideas, the movement building towards a crescendo as it absorbs more artists into its ethos, before eventually losing momentum and gradually disappearing, leaving only their mark on history and (occasionally disproportionately stuffed) museum storage magazines. The central point being that while in progress, there is a framework in place that allows an artist to effect a radical departure from their usual norm of artistic practice. In the case of Haga Kristensens Brown Period, there is also such a departure: Here however, it is brought about not by the collective formation of a sphere of socio-ideological acceptance, but rather willed into existence by personal engagement – the last remaining option for radicality perhaps, in today's fragmented socio-political situation – which also is so marked by the ever-present ghost of utilitarian project-based thinking as to make artistic independence very, very difficult. As such, the work comes into being from a state of decisive closeness to the matter at hand: A refusal to accept ignorance and intellectual debauchery; instead affirming the universal value of focused personal effort, even faced with the endless mountain of doubt stacked in front of us by modern society. Rather than a radical movement of individuals, there is a radical movement of objects unravelling the status-quo.

What becomes apparent with the *Période Brune*, is the result of Haga Kristensen's many years of intellectual and physical exertion, leading up to the simple but profound realization that art can be made and enter history only as and for society – one without the other being inherently absurd. Any act of creation must as such always be either an affirmation or denial of collective responsibility and citizenship. From this comes the understanding that struggling through the mud and shit with all the others in the end is the only wellspring of meaningful inspiration and ideals. Mid brown period work can very much be said to revolve around this sudden and intuitive realization, finding its initial shape in the work shown in the exhibition *Bruine Periode - Liegen en Opscheppen: a series of ceramic fresco combination paintings* as well as a radical new genre of performance entitled *Socio-Imaginary Performance Theater*. Here it is worth noting the first tendency towards smaller scale objects and readily available materials, indicating perhaps a desire to decouple from the logistical and socio-economic implications of large scale production in order to expand the field in which creation can take place (Later we see this become even more apparent in the form of increasingly prevalent use of cardboard boxes as not only a low-cost alternative to the conventional wooden crate for artwork transportation, but as exhibition architecture as well – becoming both a practical and aesthetic answer to recessional reality). Seen in comparison for instance with Haga Kristensen's earlier monumental scale application of the fresco technique in Oslo City Hall, to create his 100m² fresco mural entitled *Consensus Image* (which also functioned as the setting for his operatic performance piece *The Loneliness of the Index Finger (Part II): The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Conceptual State into Stabilized Theatrical Sensibility (Consensus Image)*, 2014), the reimagining of architecture into a more personal scale becomes especially apparent. In addition to the previously mentioned practicalities, the small-scale application of techniques developed for monumental architecture can also fruitfully be considered in light of the artists explorations of social imagination – something which should be kept in mind as we see this approach become typical of the brown period.

As the period moves towards its final crescendo in 2017, a crystallization of certain motifs and tendencies expose with greater clarity the artistic imperative behind the *Période Brune*: While there is a resurgence of Haga Kristensen's primeval motifs making their way into the period, for instance the ubiquitous *Prophète Malade (Sick Prophet)*; they seem to materialize with a renewed urgency. For instance, significantly we now see for the first time the ill prophet from behind, exposing the viewer to the previously only assumed landscape on which his prophetic gaze rests – placing the viewer in the position of a disciple perhaps or even, unsettlingly, whatever deity sets the afflicted prophet on his forced journey. We also see the oft repeated motif of the abstraction, which acts simultaneously as a critique of what Haga Kristensen has often been quoted referring to as “the most modern form of kitsch”, as well as a symbol of the great anti-ideals of modern society: The ungraspable structures of consensus based representational government, the endless groping for information of rationality based thinking, as well as possibly the siteless primordial communication soup called the internet, and certainly others yet to be defined. The abstractions are shown held up by figures heroically, hugged, clutched, secreted, found within sliced up, cross-sectioned sculptures incorporating painted images in the fresco technique. In a continuation of the application of the weaving technique, which is earlier in the period found

hanging like clothing or very complicated body hair beneath or above the ceramic backed fresco paintings, it now finds application as giant passe-partouts or frames for pictures. Instead of tastefully hiding themselves and the struggles that went into their making like framing is expected to do, they enclose the pictures within webs of manual labour of uncertain purpose, connoting perhaps the industrial practice of sweatshops - cornerstones of commerce and thus exploitation of bodies since time immemorial; while also confronting the recent fashionableness of textile based art. Asking perhaps, the uncomfortable question of whether the aesthetics of victimization belies a more sinister exploitation. From here, we can also draw a connection to Haga Kristensen's use of "Rosemaling", a style of ornamentation developed in the artist's country of birth, Norway. While it is now considered synonymous with the isolated Norwegian rural areas in which its development took place, and with time has been integrated into the national project of cultural ideas, it is originally an imported idea stemming from continental rococo style, brought to the country by the more internationally oriented bourgeoisie in the 17th century. Its assumed synonymy with local culture and heritage the result of a slow, isolated perversion of the flowery patterns it originates from into an abstract visual language convention of ornamented C and S shapes, whose actual origins have been subsumed by the romanticizing idealizations of cultural protectionism. What initially looks like Haga Kristensen nostalgically applying the ornaments of authenticity, something to hold on to in the face of the uncertainties of internationalism, becomes something else entirely: A display of how external representations of self will ultimately mock us with their origins, and with this betrayal initiate an even deeper form of auto-annihilation than that which they promised to keep at bay.

When seen together, these variations seem to indicate a deeper underlying theme for the period, one especially eloquently put by what must in this writer's opinion be considered a key brown work: *Période brune (Brown Period) #04* - a square, automaton-like figure holding up a pictorial representation of Haga Kristensen's well known democracy lump. As evidenced by the gap between the increasing obsolescence of manual labor brought on by mankind's unhinged pursuit of technological power and the ability of today's society, in its self-confounding state, to deal with its own haphazard leaps of progress, the urgency of the insufficiencies of the project of modernity are made painfully clear: Like the faceless automaton holding up the shapeless lump representing the so-called idea of democracy, or the enamoured abstraction-clutchers, the contemporary cultural project is so caught up in the thrilling procrastination of problem solving and a superficial mimesis of self-reflexivity to realize it is aimlessly shuffling itself about, into faceless obscurity.

Most remarkable of all however, is what can be termed the unifying superstructure of the period: Consisting of a reproduction and migration of all known brown period work, some seventy or more objects, into the decontextualizing sphere of digitized three-dimensional space, where they can effortlessly intermingle and combine to form one super-object devoid of physical qualities, existing only as image and potentiality. Picking up on the suggestive themes of propaganda, a well drilled regiment of objects marches unfettered through virtual non-space in an idealized immortalization of the impressive body of work known as the *Periode Brune*.

In this, the definitive expression of the *Periode Brune*, a great mass of objects brings into being the reality of the predicament looming over today's society in brown tones: "Les Origines moqueses", the mockery of the origins. But it is met not with despair or cynical indifference, not sarcasm - but rather with great optimism and positive endeavour: "Sceptique du Doute" - skepticism towards the (non-) practice of doubting - the self-indulgent seeking of certainty where there is none to be had - made manifest through the simple but effective application of effort and principle. Haga Kristensen's *Periode Brune* work is confounding, with its many twists, turns and returns. This is all the more reason to treat it with the same great attention to detail, urgency and seriousness with which it has come about, and to consider its implications with clarity as it enters history and becomes an undeniable *fait accompli*.

-Eirik Senje, 2017